

How many TOPS recipients stay in school?

LEIGH GUIDRY

LGUIDRY@GANNETT.COM

One-third of TOPS recipients had their awards canceled in the last 10 years, but TOPS students graduate at higher rates than their classmates.

A recent report analyzing the 20-year-old Taylor Opportunity Program for Students found that more than 50,000 recipients from fall 2005 and spring 2016 had their awards canceled.

The main cause for cancellation was not a low grade-point average, but rather keeping a full course load, according to the December 2016 report from Louisiana Board of Regents.

Recipients of the state-funded scholarship must earn at least 24 credit hours (generally eight classes) a year and maintain a minimum GPA that differs by award level. The lowest is a 2.3 (C) for freshmen; the highest is a 3.0 (B).

From 2005-2016, more than 176,500 students received TOPS awards. Thirty percent (53,704) saw their awards canceled at some point during their college career, according to the report.

Of that number, 69 percent were canceled for not taking a full load, at least 12 hours a semester or nine hours a quarter. That happened to 32,265 students.

The program is back before the Legislature as lawmakers try to find ways to keep funding it and possibly cut costs.

A bill to raise the GPA eligibility standard to 2.75 that might have saved up to \$7 million a year, lawmakers said, narrowly passed the House but was deferred by the Senate for more study.

Students on TOPS were more likely to stick with college than their classmates not receiving the scholarship. Retention and graduation rates of students who start with the award were higher, according to the report.

This supports TOPS proponents' claim that the program benefits Louisiana students by better preparing them for success in college.

The idea is that to meet scholarship eligibility criteria — which require students to take a more rigorous high school curriculum — in turn better prepares them for the ACT and for success in a two-year or four-year school, according to the report.

Data show that to be true.

Looking at 2009, 29 percent of first-time, fulltime entering cohort of TOPS recipients complete a bachelor's degree within four years, compared with 13 percent of non-TOPS students. Graduation rates typically measure completion within six years, and 62 percent of TOPS recipients graduated in 2009 after six years in school, compared to 34 percent of non-TOPS students. They spend six years in college but receive TOPS for only four of those years, or eight semesters. Meeting higher academic benchmarks could catch the eye of potential employers. "From my standpoint, if students can meet and maintain GPA and other criteria of TOPS for four years, it's a good indicator of their work effort and aptitude for the job," said Roy O. Martin III, president and CEO of RoyO Martin. "... I'm in the forestry business, but at the end of the day, I'm in the people business. That raw material comes out of high schools and out of universities." But higher ACT scores and grade-point averages do not guarantee success.

Students who had their TOPS awards canceled from 2005-06 and 2015-16 had an average ACT score of 22.9 (nearly 3 points above college entry minimums) and 3.11 GPA (a solid B average). The program was created in 1997 with the hope of keeping Louisiana's "best and brightest" students at home for college and work. It seems to have been successful in that, with 90 percent of eligible students accepting TOPS awards and enrolling in post-secondary education in Louisiana since 2006.

Of the 168,502 students deemed eligible for TOPS awards since fall 2006, more than 151,700 accepted them and enrolled in a Louisiana school. Students can take the awards to technical and community colleges (TOPS Tech), private schools and some proprietary schools. That's good news for local business and industry, Martin explained. Keeping students in state is more cost-effective for businesses looking for an educated and skilled workforce, which is cheaper the closer they can find them. "It's a lot easier to recruit and hire someone who already lives in Louisiana than to go out of state," said Martin, adding that the cost of moving or culture shifts could deter someone from making that choice.

He used his own forestry business as an example.

“If we had more trained people here it would be easier to hire and we could grow,” Martin said in an interview in November.

Martin called TOPS a “great recruiting tool,” as a built-in educated workforce could serve as an incentive to attract new business and industry to an area and create jobs.

“(Having an educated local workforce) creates an environment where businesses want to come back to Louisiana,” Martin said. “We need it now.”

And students might consider going to college in-state on TOPS worth sticking around when they get one of those new jobs.

“Where you graduate from is a pretty good indicator of where you end up,” Martin said.